

TRAJAN'S COLUMN VERSUS NUMISMATIC PROGRAMME. PROTOTYPES IN THE TRAJANIC IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY¹

Abstract: Using comparative analysis between scenes on Trajan's Column and certain coin types, the paper identifies that numismatic sources have served in many cases to design images on the Column. The powerful meaning of symbols on coins – with a long-established tradition – was well used by the sculptors of the Column as it had a strong impact on the audience.

Keywords: Trajan's Column. Prototypes, numismatic programme, imperial ideology

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“καὶ ἔστησεν ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ καὶ κίονα μέγιστον, ἅμα μὲν ἐς ταφήν ἑαυτοῦ, ἅμα δὲ ἐς ἐπιδείξιν του κατὰ τὴν ἀγορὰν ἔργου.”

“And he set up in the Forum an enormous column, to serve at once as a monument to himself and as a memorial of his work in the Forum.”²

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Even for the Romans in the long series of the Roman emperors, even for the Romans, the reign of Trajan is known among the most famous ones: “..., *melior Traiano*”³ ([be] better than Trajan). Apart from the ancient authors, the merit that such a successful reign is well-known to us can also be credited to the monumental building program in the time of Trajan. Amongst numerous monuments that were built up under Trajan is the famous column erected in his forum.

The column is an impressive monument of Roman art at the beginning of the second century AD. The column ‘narrates’ the story of the two Dacian wars through marvellous sculptured scenes. Besides being a funerary monument⁴, a monument of military triumph⁵ the column is also known as a monument of the imperial propaganda.⁶

¹ I express here my gratitude towards Dr. Bernhard Woytek (University of Vienna, Austria) who kindly provided me with important information on various aspects presented in this study.

² Cassius Dio, LXVIII.16.3; translation by Cary 1925.

³ Eutropius, *Breviarum*, 8.5.7.

⁴ DAVIES 1997, 45-46.

⁵ WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, 32. I express here my gratitude to Prof. Elizabeth Wolfram-Thill for allowing me to read the manuscript version of her study while it was still under peer-review process.

⁶ SCHEIPER 1982; DAVIES 1997, 65.

At the first sight the scenes runs one after the other in a narrative-chronological order. In order to deliver the right message of the imperial ideology to the audience, apart from the artistic quality of pictures, the sculptors had to use the right imagery. The one that already had a tradition within the Roman society. In fact, all the scenes on the column have a symbolic nature combined with the artistic skill of sculptors.⁷ Some scholars have considered that part of the scenes were included only because of their ideological and symbolic value.⁸

The aim of this study is to point out the fact that the scenes on the Trajan's column contains also some prototypes that, under the cover of an artistic design, delivered that message which those responsible with the spread of the imperial propaganda/ideology wanted to be sent to be received by the audience.

In order to demonstrate this aspect one should look for another thing that has played the same role of spreading the imperial ideology within the Roman society through symbols and this item is the Roman coinage. Its economic function made the coinage an object accepted at all levels of society. Such a particular characteristic could not pass unnoticed by the state to use the coin as the most widespread instrument of state ideology.⁹ Therefore, coinage is one of the most important source for understanding the developing of Roman ideology.¹⁰ It started in the Republic and reached the peak under the Empire. Although the coinage cannot offer those details like the literary sources, still, they have "several advantages for the historian" such as presenting the "official line".¹¹ As N. Elkins demonstrated, some of the images depicted on Roman coins "were straightforward, denoting clear and specific messages attached to recent events, while others were more symbolic, connoting broader ideals or concepts."¹²

Practically, we compare here two items that were used by the Roman state to spread a certain propagandistic/ideological message to the public. Particularly, in the case of Trajan's reign, as E. Wolfram-Thill demonstrated, "the general subjects and themes of Trajanic monumental reliefs and coinage are strikingly coincident".¹³

The first observation to be made is that the most common Trajanic architectural type on coins is...the Column.¹⁴ At the same time, another common aspect revealed by the two items analysed in this study is that both were designed to 'tell the world' about this glorious victory of Trajan upon the brave Dacians who, according to Pliny the Younger, never been subdued before.¹⁵ While the Column scenes presents in a very attractive and glorifying style this victory, the coin series dedicated to the Dacian Wars was the largest one ever minted by the Roman state for one military event only (109 coin types: 40 for gold and silver denominations, 69 for bronze ones).¹⁶

⁷ TURCAN-DÉLÉANI 1958, 149-176.

⁸ HANNESTADT 1989, VOL. 2, 28.

⁹ SCHEIPER 1982, 32.

¹⁰ RIEDEL 2013, 7.

¹¹ HOWGEGO 1997, 62.

¹² ELKINS 2011, 645.

¹³ WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, 31.

¹⁴ ELKINS 2011, 650.

¹⁵ Plinius, *Epistolae*, VIII, 4, 1-2.

¹⁶ The coin types were counted according to the RIC II – Trajan.

Below are prototypes that can be easily tracked down on both Trajan's Column and Roman coinage.

VICTORY

As a monument depicting the wars ended with the Roman victory upon the Dacians the representation of Victory on the column is a *sine-qua-non* condition. Victory is depicted in scene LXXVIII inscribing or ready to inscribe an oval shield – *clipeus virtutis* – set on a *cippus* and holding her left foot on helmet (Pl. 1, fig.1). This representation is identical with the prototype on coins¹⁷ (Pl. 1, fig. 2). As the coin type was issued in AD 102¹⁸ it can be affirmed that the sculptors could have easily used the coin as prototype for the scene on the Column.

Furthermore, the coinage, in this case, can bring more detailed information on how much attention did the 'department' of imperial ideology pay to this aspect. One can easily noticed a close connection between the chronology of events – before, during and after the Dacian wars – and the evolution of the type 'Victory holding *clipeus virtutis*'.

On the earlier versions of the Trajan's coin type of Victory with shield (AD 98-100) the goddess is depicted holding a *clipeus virtutis* inscribed S P Q R¹⁹. Then, this type was issued simultaneously²⁰ with the type that could have served as prototype for scene LXXVII on the Column – Victory standing right inscribing on a *clipeus virtutis* set on a *cippus* (Pl. 1, fig. 2). The last type of this series ends, as one would expect, with the type showing Victory next to the *clipeus virtutis* now inscribed VIC/ DAC or DA/CI/CA (*Victoria Dacica*) (Pl. 1, figs. 3-4)²¹.

This series can be regarded as an equivalent of a newspaper that has been kept updated following the war events. The imperial ideology was very interested to make sure the society will be well aware about the Roman victory upon the Dacians.

THE TROPHY

As a monument celebrating a victory, the trophy depiction could not be absent on Trajan's Column. The same scene, mentioned above – LXXVIII²² – presents two trophies. One can easily identified the trophy due to its specific design: the shape of a tree with a pair of arm-like branches upon which is hung the armour, weaponry of defeated enemy (Pl. 1, fig. 1).²³ Apart from the representation of Victory the trophy was the most representative symbol used by the Roman ideology to make the public aware of an important military victory of the state. Therefore again the coinage was the object to distribute the news of such a victory.

The trophy appeared on Roman coins already in late 3rd century BC and will continue to be part of the numismatic program until 4th century.²⁴ The prototype stood the same with some variants (changing on weaponry, presence of one

¹⁷ MIR 14, no. 126

¹⁸ MIR 14, 247.

¹⁹ MIR 14, 47, 61, 65, 90, 94.

²⁰ MIR 14, 113.

²¹ MIR 14, 204, 210-1, 346, 377, 389.

²² As the entire scene is designed following coin prototypes it may be nicknamed as the 'coin prototypes' scene.

²³ IBARRA 2009, 15, with bibliography (n. 26).

²⁴ IBARRA 2009, 19-22.

or two captives).²⁵ Thus, if the trophy is depicted on the column, for certainly, it had to be represented on the coins of Trajan celebrating the victory upon the Dacians. The 'trophy' series is well represented by issues in silver and bronze denominations and for both Dacian wars (Pl. 2, figs. 5-8).²⁶

THE RIVER (DANUBE) (Pl. 3, fig. 10)

The Danube deity is depicted on the column as supervising/protecting the Roman troops crossing the homonym river (scenes III-IV). He is depicted as a bearded male with a naked muscular bust and garlanded head, raising from the river's water (Pl. 3, fig. 9). The symbolism of the scene goes further in details. The river god has his face in profile with a slightly gaze like protecting the crossing of the river by the Roman troops.²⁷ "...it is an amiable and benign river that will not let loose the full force of its formidable current upon the Roman crossing-point(s)."²⁸

Although the representations of rivers' deities are known from the end of the Republic they became more frequently noticed in Roman state imagery starting with Flavians²⁹ and will come to the end during the 3rd century AD.³⁰ The first rivers represented in Roman private and public art were the Tiber and the Nile, both connected to the imperial house through their meaning of piety (the Tiber) and glory (the Nile), and both with religious connotations.³¹ Once the rivers were 'directly' involved in military campaigns the imagery has to be re-adapted according to the imperial propaganda. A coin of Domitian, depicting river god Rhine (*Rhenus*) was issued to advertise to the public on his 'successful' campaign on the Rhine against the Germanics.³² Thus, under Trajan, the meaning of depicting river deity on the reverses of this emperor's coins – three new rivers are depicted in his time: the Danube, the Tigris and the Euphrates – are connected with his military achievements.³³

The well-known imagery of river deity on coin as well as on Roman art monuments – at the origins, a Hellenistic prototype³⁴ – shows the deity in 'a reclining position, as a corpulent and muscular man with thick hair and a large beard. The head is tilted sideways and is crowned by a garland of flowers. His right leg is raised; both his legs are covered by a mantle.'³⁵

Although the prototype of the river god on coins had certain features (reclining position of a male nude bust, spring-urns and, sometimes, reed), the imperial authorities took care to provide specific attributes – hippopotamus, crocodile, sphinx and cornucopiae for the Nile (Pl. 3, fig. 11); an aqueduct for Aqua Traiana (Pl. 3, fig. 12). At the same time, additional inscriptions provided clear explanation on representation: *DANVVIVS*, *NILVS*, *AQVA TRAIANA* (Pl. 3, figs. 10-12). These details were emphasized by the state to be

certain that the audience will know precisely where or what "mission" the emperor successfully accomplished.

Regarding the comparative imagery of river god, unlike the prototypes for Victory and the trophy, the river deity Danuvius is partially differently depicted on column – see the description above (Pl. 3, fig. 9) – than on coins. This difference can be logically explained by the necessity to include the figure of the river god Danuvius within the artistic scheme, "mise en page", designed by the sculptors of the column. Even in a different standing position one can easily recognize the figure as being the river god: bearded and garlanded head, naked muscular bust.

A similar analogy regarding the using of coin types as inspiration source for public monuments can be considered the equestrian statue of Domitian, today lost but described by Statius in his *Silvae*.³⁶ The statue illustrated the emperor on horseback, holding a statuette of Minerva in his left hand, while raising his right. The river god Rhine was underneath while Domitian's horse trampling on the river.³⁷ The analogy on the numismatic evidence is the above mentioned sestertius showing Domitian standing left, holding spear and parazonium, at foot, the river god *Rhenus* reclining right.³⁸

Concerning the representation of the river god Danuvius on Trajan's coins, another coin type minted during the reign of this emperor is worth mentioning here. The river god, Danuvius, symbol of the Roman conquerors of Dacia,³⁹ holds down the female personification of Dacia by right arm and right leg. The leg is bent at an angle and the knee of which presses down on Dacia's belly. Dacia's legs are restrained by Mithras' left leg, which is almost fully extended (fig. 13). This imagery is strongly affiliated to the well-known position of Mithras during tauroctony "which became a fashionable image once again in the reign of Trajan" (Pl. 4, fig. 14).⁴⁰

THE BRIDGE OVER THE DANUBE (Pl. 4, fig. 15)

The image of the stone bridge built over the Danube before the second Dacian war is depicted on scene XCVIII (Pl. 4, fig. 16). The bridge was not only a strategic construction but also an important achievement of monumental architecture and an excellent occasion for public display of the state. Therefore, the bridge was frequently part of the numismatic imagery on Roman coins.⁴¹

While in the case of the previously mentioned prototypes one can easily see the resemblance between the Roman imagery on coins and the scenes on Trajan's Column, the bridge imagery is still under debate.

Some scholars have considered the curved shape of the bridge depicted on Trajan's coins as representing the Pons Sublicius – the oldest bridge of Rome.⁴² Still, as it has been stated: "This was likely suggested due to the difference between this bridge shape [the one shown on the coin] and that depicted on Trajan's column. Credit must be given to

²⁵ RIC volumes, indexes, s.v. trophy.

²⁶ MIR 14, 163 (silver), 196 (bronze) – after the first Dacian War; 231, 268 (silver), 243-245, 256-258, 326-327 (bronze) – after the second Dacian War.

²⁷ JONES 2000, 483-484.

²⁸ LEPPER/FRERE 1988, 50.

²⁹ PENDERS 2012, 6-9.

³⁰ PENDERS 2012, 21-38.

³¹ PENDERS 2012, 8-9.

³² RIC II.1, no. 56; PENDERS 2012, 11.

³³ PENDERS 2012, 13.

³⁴ PENDERS 2012, 6.

³⁵ PENDERS 2012, 6.

³⁶ Statius, *Silvae*, I.1.

³⁷ PENDERS 2012, 11.

³⁸ RIC II.1, no. 356; PENDERS 2012, 11.

³⁹ JONES 2000, 481-482.

⁴⁰ CLAUS/GORDON 2001, 79.

⁴¹ RIC volumes, indexes, s.v. bridge.

⁴² For the bibliography on identification of the bridge on Trajan's coins as Pons Sublicius see KLEINER 1991, 187, n. 18.

the die engraver, who had to render the important details of the Danube Bridge on a small circular surface. A more true-to-scale Danube bridge would have appeared as an unimpressive thin line across the center of the flan, with little opportunity to show the impressive entrance arch and statues. Those not familiar with the appearance of the bridge on the coin can at least recognize the structure as a bridge, thanks to the addition of the boat tied up on the river bank.⁴³

On the other hand, one specific aspect of the numismatic imagery in the time of Trajan, is the large variety of the monumental and architectural complexes depicted on his coins. The column itself had its own monetary series.⁴⁴ The bridge over the Danube may have had a strong impact upon the Roman audience if we take into account the impressive space allocated by Cassius Dio together with his admiration for this architectural achievement.⁴⁵ Therefore, the second longest known bridge of ancient history (1,135 m)⁴⁶ was for certain taken into account to be symbolized on a coin reverse series. Another argument of logical nature to support this theory has been forwarded by N. Elkins who states that the distribution of the 'bridge' and 'column' coin series throughout provinces and not limited to Rome and the Italian peninsula – like other architectural types of Trajan and other emperors – could be seen as a propaganda for "Trajan's martial ingenuity"⁴⁷

ADLOCUTIO

As the Trajan's Column is also a military triumphal monument, scenes depict soldiers in an exhaustive register of their activities. Certainly, the imperial ideology also took profit on this aspect and presents the emperor interacting frequently with the military.⁴⁸ From this point of view a coin prototype that could have been used by the sculptors for their scenes on the Column is the *Adlocutio* type.⁴⁹ A coin type of Trajan (MIR 14, 43) depicts on revers the prototype for *Adlocutio*: the emperor stands on a low platform. He wears military dress and he is assisted by another person. A group of soldiers stands looking up at the emperor (Pl. 5, fig. 18). The Column displays the similar *adlocutio* scenes (LIIII, LXXVII, CIIII, CXXXVII) (Pl. 5, fig. 17).

The *Adlocutio* type was not minted only starting with Trajan but had already a long tradition that goes back to Caligula.⁵⁰

As E. Wolfram-Thill has noted, a striking aspect is the fact that these coin types "appear exclusively on coins from the first year of Trajan's reign"⁵¹ and not during the Dacian Wars.

THE MILITARY OATH

Like in the case of the *adlocutio*, another military type that shares the same pattern is the one depicting the "military oath". On the coin type reverse the emperor is wearing *toga praetexta*, his "right arm extended over a small altar topped with flames... Facing him across the altar are four soldiers... A legionary eagle and a second standard are in the background." (fig. 19)⁵²

On Trajan's Column, the scene LIII depicts a similar image. The emperor, now veiled, sacrificing over an altar in front of a group of military and standards (fig. 20). The number of military is larger as the size of sculptured scene allows unlike the coin flan. Similar to the *adlocutio* type, also in this case there is an earlier prototype issued under Domitian.⁵³

As mentioned in the case of *adlocutio* coin type, the one with military oath is also known through a very rare series minted at the beginning of the reign of Trajan (Pl. 5, fig. 19).⁵⁴

THE SUBMISSION OF A DEFEATED POPULATION AND ITS KING (DEDITIO)

Unlike the other prototypes presented above, it can be suggested that scenes from the Column could have served as prototype for coin types.

An argument on this line is the case of scene LXXV. The emperor, draped and cuirassed, is seated on *sella castrensis* (?) elevated on a *suggestum*. He is attended by several officers. On the other side are the signiferi and a guard of praetorians. In the foreground below the emperor is a Dacian on his knees, with his hands raised to the knees of Trajan imploring forgiveness. Two other Dacians are kneeling on one knee in front of him. Five men stand bound behind them. Behind these prisoners a crowd of Dacians kneel and stretch out both hands imploring the clemency of emperor. On far rear stands king Decebalus outstretching his arms seeking for peace (Pl. 6, fig. 21).⁵⁵

The depiction of the submission of a foreign king on coin is already known for the reign of Augustus but it was a simple symbolic image.⁵⁶ In order to make a strong and widely distributed propaganda on the submission of the Parthian king Parthamasiris the state issued a coin type series REX PARTHVS in gold and bronze denominations (Pl. 6, figs. 22-23). Looking at these series one can easily observe a similarity between the Dacian king submission scene on Trajan's column and a variant of the REX PARTHVS type: "Trajan, in military dress, is seated on a *sella castrensis* on a podium to the right. His feet are set apart on a stool, his right hand out-stretched. Behind him stands an official, also in military dress. Directly in front of the podium, at the center of the design, is the Parthian king, shown in profile with his knees bent slightly and his hands outstretched to Trajan's feet[...]. Behind and to the left of the king are five to six soldiers, facing Trajan. They wear full armor and hold shields, spears, and three standards." (Pl. 6, figs. 22-23).⁵⁷

⁴³ http://vacc.shawwebpace.ca/asset/view/.../trajans_danube_river_bridge.pdf.

⁴⁴ MIR 14, 424-425, 472-474, 493, 502-503, 514, 537-539.

⁴⁵ Cassius Dio, LXVIII, 13, 1-6.

⁴⁶ The bridge of Constantine I (1137 m spanned the river bed) built in AD 328 across the Danube is considered the longest one in the ancient history, GALLIAZZO 1994, 319-320, no. 645.

⁴⁷ ELKINS 2011, 651.

⁴⁸ For an exhaustive analyse on the topic of Trajan interacting with groups of subjects see WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, mss.

⁴⁹ For the most recent discussion on the *Adlocutio* type on Roman imperial coins see WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, mss, 22-23.

⁵⁰ RIC I², nos. 32, 48.

⁵¹ WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, mss, 15.

⁵² WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, mss, 7-8.

⁵³ RIC II.1, 2; WOYTEK 2005, 202; WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, mss. 8.

⁵⁴ WOYTEK 2005, 202; MIR 14, 41; WOLFRAM-THILL 2013, mss. 8.

⁵⁵ Description based on POLLEN 1874, 148.

⁵⁶ RIC I², 287-288.

⁵⁷ WOLFRAM-THILL 2010, 18; MIR 14, no. 509v (bronze); 516f (gold).

As the news on the submission of the Dacian king Decebalus has produced a large impact in the Roman society to deserve a distinguished scene on Trajan's Column, so, it was with the similar act of the Parthian king *deditio*. In the last case the imagery on coin type is confirmed by literary sources.⁵⁸

However, at this point, we must point out here a particular feature of the submission scene on the Column compared to the prototype of submission type on coin and literary sources. Trajan's Column is depicting the submission of king Decebalus in a more dignified style. The Dacian king is placed behind his subjects and not right in front of the emperor. While most of the Dacians are kneeling he standing and just slightly stretching his arms to entreat peace, like the Dacians around him.⁵⁹ In order to be recognized as the Dacian leader by the Roman audience Decebalus is placed on a higher ground than the rest of the Dacians in that scene (Pl. 6, fig. 21). In fact, the whole scene contradicts Cassius Dio statement on this moment: 'καὶ ἄκον ὀμοπόγησε, ρος τε τὸν Τραϊανὸν ἐπθὼν καὶ ἐς τὴν γῆν πεσὼν καὶ προσκυνήσας αὐτὸν' ('he had come to Trajan, fallen upon the ground and done obeisance and thrown away his arms').⁶⁰ How the submission of king Decebalus did really happen?

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of these prototypes on both Trajan's Column and his coinage shows two important characteristics of the Roman imperial ideology: on one side, the high interest of Roman state on using the monuments and the coinage as the best instruments to spread the official message; on the other hand, the existence of a certain audience that understood the imagery, the symbols that bear the message. At the same time the Roman state "understood the communicative value of architectural images and directed certain architectural designs to relevant audience".⁶¹ Furthermore, it can be concluded that this comparison between coin prototypes and their presence on Trajan's Column confirms once more that the mint of Rome during the reign of Trajan was governed by selecting topical imagery.⁶² Furthermore, M. Beckmann has considered that the gold and bronze coins were more frequently used for news content while silver, due to the mass production of coins, for more generic types.⁶³

Penelope Davies has demonstrated that in the case of Trajan's Column "sculptural and architectural form come together most successfully in the service of viewer manipulation" to perpetuate the memory of Trajan and to understand "Trajan's illustrious career".⁶⁴ Practically, one can speak about Column as a self-apotheosis of the sovereign where the themes of imperial ideology are presented in a "realistic" form.⁶⁵ It can be added that the coinage has entirely followed the same line, as an old imperial tradition following "a highly developed visual and verbal language of

imperial ideology".⁶⁶ On the same line, the Column itself followed "a broader artistic tradition that connected Roman culture to its architecture".⁶⁷

Metaphoric speaking, it can be affirmed, that using prototypes, the Trajan's Column became itself a prototype for later imperial funerary monuments (e.g. Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius columns) and, especially, for triumphal/commemorative monuments up to nowadays (e.g. the two columns of Karlskirche, Vienna; the column "de la grand Armée", Wimille (Pas-de-Calais); Nelson columns – Montreal, Dublin, London; Vendôme Column – Paris; Congress Column, Brussels; Astoria column, Oregon).⁶⁸

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- ⁶¹ ELKINS 2011, 653.
- ⁶² BECKMANN 2009, 154.
- ⁶³ BECKMANN 2009, 155.
- ⁶⁴ DAVIES 1997, 58.
- ⁶⁵ STROBEL 2010, 320-321.
- ⁶⁶ HOWGEGO 1997, 75.
- ⁶⁷ WOLFRAM-THILL 2010, 41.
- ⁶⁸ For a complete list of columns for which Trajan's Column served as the prototype see: <http://statuiedaci.ro/en/statues-impact-on-european-culture/trajan-s-column/impact-of-trajan-s-column-on-art-i>.

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Fig.1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Plate 1



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



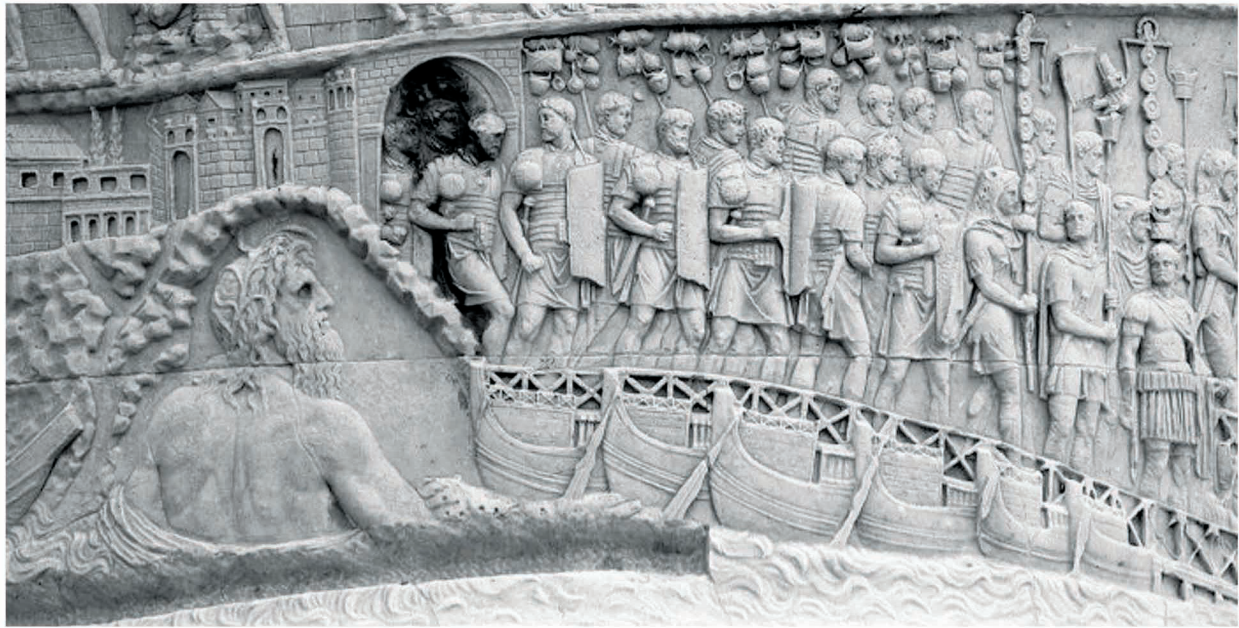


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Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Plate 3



Fig.13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Plate 4



Fig.17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20



Fig.21



Fig. 23



Fig. 22

Plate 6